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ABSTRACT

The program known as the Alaska Rural Teacher Training Corps (ARTTC) was established in 1970 as a 4-year experimental program to train Native elementary school teachers for rural Alaskan native communities or for any school in the country where an Alaskan teaching certificate is acceptable. The beginning group included an even distribution of males and females ranging in age from 18 to 48 who are a mixture of 4 distinct native groups. As the program proceeded, it became apparent that it was not going to be simply a matter of applying the latest teacher training techniques. This paper explains the 3 basic questions explored in the program: (1) Why train natives to become teachers? (2) What is a native teacher? and (3) How do you train native teachers? Another area that was investigated is the curriculum: what students were doing, and what they were supposed to learn during their stay in the program. Finally, the paper discusses what participants in this experimental program learned. This evaluation and discussion of the above areas concludes that it is difficult to be a native and a teacher too. The program may not really be training "teachers" since the feed-back from the participants was that they felt more like general practitioners than specialists. Also, literature in education, as well as anthropology, is often of limited use in the program. (FF)

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Being a Native and Becoming a Teacher In the Alaska Rural Teacher Training Corps

by

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In the following paper I will attempt to reconstruct the conceptual evolution of a program for the training of Alaskan native teachers. I will describe the first two years of the program's development, focusing on those aspects that reflect consideration of the unique cultural environment in which the program operates. I address these issues from the perspective of an academic coordinator for the program since its inception. My formal training is in anthropology and education. To the extent that a native point of view is expressed in this paper, it is a product of my interpretation of that view as a non-native, and should be judged accordingly. "Native" is used here to refer to descendants of all the indigenous peoples of Alaska.

Background

The program, known as the Alaska Rural Teacher Training Corps (or ARTTC), was established in 1970 as a four-year experimental program with a number of vague purposes, one of which was the training of native elementary school teachers. The original proposal specified that the training would be primarily field-centered (that is, two out of three semesters coursework per year would be delivered out to the villages), and that it would meet the usual requirements for a Bachelor of Education degree. Under a somewhat ambiguous administrative arrangement involving two universities and the State-operated school system, three staff persons (one representing each of the above) were hired and charged with implementing the program. Eleven training sites were established in rural native communities around the State and each was assigned a team of four to eight students and a full-time,

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certificated team leader. Thirty freshmen-level students were recruited from the local communities and another thirty junior-level students were recruited statewide. Due to a limited number of native students with two years of college training available at the time, half of the junior-level students selected were non-native. In the beginning then, a typical team had three native freshmen students, most of whom had not completed high school, and three juniors, one or two of whom were non-native, along with an experienced teacher as a team leader. The total group included a nearly balanced distribution of male and female members, an age range from 18 to 48 with a median of 26, and a mixture of five distinct native ethnic groups.

With this as the "raw material", we (the three program staff and eleven team leaders) set out to produce teachers. We began to plan for a six week orientation program that was to prepare everyone for the years ahead. As we proceeded, however, we gradually realized it was not going to be simply a matter of applying the latest teacher training techniques to this particular group of individuals, thus producing a new breed of teacher for rural Alaska. With this realization, we found it necessary to step back and ask ourselves some basic questions:

1. Why train natives to be teachers?
2. What is a "native" teacher?
2. How do you train "native" teachers?

Why train natives to be teachers?

Our initial response to the question, "Why train native teachers?" was to point out that nearly every recent study and report on native education in the country recommended such action. In addition, there was the political pressure from the natives themselves to become a part of the action. But that didn't

answer the basic question, "Why?" It soon became obvious that we were moving into relatively uncharted territory and the only landmarks we could see were a few untested assumptions, such as:

1. A native teacher will be better able to assess and respond to the needs of a native child. This assumption presumes that similarities in language and cultural background between teacher and child will improve communication and thus, foster greater mutual understanding and learning.
2. A native teacher will provide a model of success in the native community. This assumption presumes that teachers are viewed favorably in the native community and that native persons will aspire to teaching positions. It also presumes that a native teacher will achieve status in the eyes of the native community.
3. A native teacher will serve as a community leader and help bridge the gulf between the native community and the "outside" society. An inherent danger in this assumption is that the "bridge" provided by the teacher, native or non-native, may allow for one-way traffic only - away from the native community.

Since these remained as untested assumptions due to an insufficient sampling pool of native teachers, we had to explore another question, "Why have so few natives become teachers in the past?" On the basis of our own training and experience, we were unwilling to accept any notion of "inferior ability" on the part of the native, so the easiest answer to the question was to blame "the system." Only a few native students were coming to the universities for an education, fewer were enrolling in teacher training, fewer yet were completing a four-year degree program, and of those who did complete a teacher training program, only a small number returned to a native community to teach. But blaming the system was not getting at the real answer to the question either. So again, we had to postulate

some ideas through which we could determine how best to proceed with a program that was supposed to resolve this particular problem. Our assumptions were:

1. The university campus does not provide a satisfactory learning environment for students whose cultural background is significantly different from that out of which the university system emerged. Coming to the university is a one-way street for most native students. A successful campus experience requires familiarity with and adherence to a wide range of socio-cultural patterns, many of which are not compatible with the attitudinal and behavioral skills required for survival in the village. Thus, a person who learns to survive on campus may find he is no longer satisfied with, or acceptable to, his home community. The transformation of an individual's interests and outlook during four years of college is further complicated by the unprecedented changes in life styles existent in the villages themselves, resulting in even greater potential incompatibility.
2. The teacher training curriculum is largely unsuited to the needs of students desiring to teach in rural native communities. While it could be argued that this assumption applies to teacher training in general, the problem is most acute for those who wish to teach in a physical and cultural environment that is divergent from the uni-dimensional, ethnocentric model around which most teacher training programs are designed. Contemporary teacher training curriculum places a great deal of emphasis on preparing the teacher to assess and provide for "individual differences." Students are saturated with a psychological perspective of learning and teaching derived largely from the study of individuals and small groups within Western society. While such training may be useful, and even

> necessary, it does not provide an adequate perspective for assessing and responding to the needs of children in rural native communities. Their individual needs can be adequately assessed only within the context of the broader social and cultural environment within which they exist.

Assuming then, that native teachers would provide a unique and desirable service to rural native communities, and that the detachment of the campus experience and the inadequacy of the teacher training curriculum were partially responsible for the limited number of such persons, we now had a rationale and some points of departure from which to proceed on our evolutionary journey.

What is a "native" teacher?

We did not proceed far, however, before we realized that in order to develop and operate a teacher training program we had to have some idea of what the end product would be, or at least a direction in which to move. We had an alternative to the campus setting, in that the program would be largely field-centered, but we could not develop an alternative curriculum until we had some idea of the kind of teacher we were looking for. We could have taken the traditional teacher training curriculum and delivered it to the students in the field, on the assumption that such an approach would at least succeed in placing some natives in the teaching profession. But this approach would not capitalize on the unique strengths the students might possess as natives. Worse yet, it might even destroy some of those strengths.

On the other hand, we could deviate from the traditional curriculum by defining the teachers' role in terms of "competencies" and judge the students' teaching ability on the basis of "performance criteria". In this way we would at least have some flexibility in defining the end product. But defining the competencies required for a "native" teacher proved to be an elusive endeavor, for no prototype existed. The handful of teachers of native descent in the State

had all gone through a traditional teacher training program. In addition, no one prototype of a teacher, native or otherwise, could possibly satisfy the diverse cultural and educational needs of the rural native communities. We, therefore, abandoned a strict "competency-based" approach.

We knew, from the limited literature on the subject (primarily Collier), that subtle differences between native and non-native "teachers" in their relationships with native children appear to have a significant impact on the response of the children, even though the materials presented and the learning environments are otherwise similar. The differences are reflected largely in non-verbal behavior and derive primarily from differences in prior experience and particular attitudes and values. One of our major concerns then, was to avoid destroying those characteristics inherent in the native person's attitude and behavior that might provide them with the margin of success as a teacher. Although avoiding the negative may not be as desirable as accentuating the positive, we could at least now state that the program would attempt to protect and nurture the intrinsic qualities that the students brought with them. But we were no further along in explicating those qualities.

We were also aware that the institution of "schooling" and thus, the role of "teacher" as we know it today, were once alien notions in the rural communities, introduced to the native people within this century by outsiders who only vaguely understood or anticipated the consequences of their action. While "education" was viewed primarily as an informal and life-long process prior to the arrival of schools in rural Alaska, it has since become synonymous with those activities that occur within the large, brightly-lit building on the hill, and is further restricted to six hours a day, 180 days a year. Consequently, the parents and children in the remotest community in Alaska have developed expectations regarding the role of "teacher' similar to those held in any other community where a school,

a classroom full of children, and a teacher exist. If we, therefore, presumed to be capable of developing a new definition of the teacher's role to suit the unique cultural background of a particular native group or person, we would first have to convince parents and children that the new role was designed to better meet their particular needs, and then we would have to convince the school system that it should modify its design to accommodate the changed role. We did not consider it within our ability or power to accomplish any of the above three tasks.

Any effort to define the native teacher's role in the context of a specific cultural background was further constrained by the desire on the part of the students themselves to be prepared to teach, not only in a rural Alaskan native community, but in any school in the country where an Alaskan teaching certificate is an acceptable license to teach. They did not want a second-rate education. We resolved, therefore, that the best judges of what constitutes a native teacher would be the students we were about to train, so the most logical course of action was to obtain their assistance in the development of the program. In that way, we could help the students define their role as we went along. Maybe in the end then we would have some basis for determining whether a native could be a native and a teacher too. Consequently, what follows is as much the product of student thought and effort as it is that of the program staff.

How do you train "native" teachers?

With a few assumptions in hand to serve as guidelines, a basic framework within which to work, a vague direction in which to move, and a group of enthusiastic students to lead us, we ventured forth on our journey. Following a brief getting acquainted and settling in period out in the field sites, all the students and staff came together for an intensive six-week orientation and work session. It was during this session that the essence of the program evolved. By living and working in confined quarters over an extended period and coping with a variety of social pressures and emotional issues, the members of the group developed a bond

of friendship and a commitment to common purpose that has enabl d many of them to survive subsequent pressures and adjustments that migh; other ise have ended in defeat.

The individuals from each field site, including the team leader, began to work together, gradually forming a closely knit working team, in which the whole became more than the sum of its parts. Team members assisted each other in their work and openly exchanged ideas and opinions to their mutual benefit. Native and non-native students viewed each other as equals and began to explore their similarities and differences. Natives from different ethnic backgrounds within the State discovered they could learn much from each other. They learned how to communicate and understand each other's views through direct experience. Once established, this interaction process carried over on their return to the field sites. The native students learned how to cope with "the system" from the non-native students, who in turn, learned how to cope with village life from the native students. The mutual support generated by the team spirit also contributed to the success of many students in coping with the campus environment during subsequent summer sessions.

Following the return of the students to the field, we discovered that one of our earlier assumptions could use a corollary: The native community does not provide a satisfactory learning environment for students whose cultural background is significantly different from that of the native community. The non-native students, who comprised one-fourth of our student population, were responsible for nearly one-half of our drop-outs during the first year. They were experiencing the same problems of adjustment to the native community that native students experience coming on campus. Most of the non-native students were sympathetic, anti-establishment types who saw the program as a way to get around the established system while they solved the problems of native education. But when they had to

confront the realities of existence in a physical and cultural environment unfamiliar to them, many found themselves unprepared, and experienced varying degrees of cultural shock. Their behavior followed a pattern in which the initial zeal and eagerness to right the wrongs of past generations gradually gave way to reality. As they became aware of the demands of day-to-day survival in the village and the immense complexity of the task they were undertaking, they began to withdraw and attack the training program for not providing them with the skills they needed to make good their intentions. With the realization that their survival was now dependent on their individual willingness to endure the psychological trauma of adjustment to a new cultural milieu, the willy-nillies began separating themselves from the confirmed liberals. Those students who survived this stage of the ordeal, gradually established close ties with their fellow team members and became strong advocates for the native community.

A major factor contributing to the circumstances described above, was the field-centered nature of the program. But while this approach created some adjustment problems for the non-native students, it provided numerous advantages for the native students, and for the program as a whole. The delivery of the training to the rural native communities permitted the native students to control the effect of the learning experience by allowing them to encounter it on their own ground and on their own terms. With the help of fellow team members, including the team leader, the students approached their coursework as a cooperative enterprise. When a student had difficulties with a particular assignment, or went into a general slump, someone was close at hand to help him out. Also, the students did not feel threatened by the instructors (who were sometimes 1500 miles away) or a large classroom environment, so they did not hesitate to provide feedback to the instructors regarding the courses they were receiving. Nearly all of the instructors who have worked with the program have commented favorably on the quality of work and degree of interest shown by the students in the coursework.

The most significant consequence of the field-centered approach was that it permitted the native students to maintain contact with their own community. Their relationships in the community were often strengthened and several students moved into leadership positions as they developed their abilities to understand and deal with community and school problems. Although the native students were developing many skills and ideas of non-native origin, they were learning and changing within the context of the community, so that no major discontinuity was experienced. Changes within the students and within the communities were continually blended through cohabitation, thus allowing for compatibility of interests and role as their new life styles evolved.

The same process applied to the native students' experiences in the schools. They gradually worked their way into the classrooms and assumed a variety of roles, sometimes adapting to the situation, othertimes adapting the situation to themselves. In this way, each student was able to define and carve out his own role as a native teacher in the school and community.

Curriculum

So far I have focused my discussion on two particular structural elements of the training program, namely the team concept and the field-centered approach. What about the curriculum? What were the students doing, and what were they supposed to be learning during their stay in the program. In the development of the training experience in the program, our concern was focused on the totality of the students' experience--not just the particular courses they would take. Thus, curriculum must be viewed in its broadest sense, as encompassing context, process and content. In that sense, the team concept and field-centered approach were integral parts of the curriculum.

The context was the community, within which the school was viewed as one element in the total educational experience of each child. The students spent

nearly all of the first year living, working and studying out in the community. The training program attempted to capitalize on the resources available to the students through activities that brought the students in direct contact with the realities they would face as teachers.

Within this context, the students learned through an experiential process--that is, they came to understand the world around them and their role in it through direct experience. They learned how a community operates by living in and studying their own community. They learned how a child grows by interacting with and observing real children. They learned how to teach by teaching. They learned how to learn, from each other as a team.

On top of all this, we had the curriculum content. This could be partially summarized by running down the course list on a student's transcript. But the course titles cannot adequately portray the learning experiences associated with each course, particularly those offered in the field. The field courses were drawn primarily from the social sciences, the humanities, and education, since these could be most easily adapted to, and capitalize on the field setting. So a course that appeared on the transcript as "Anthropological Field Methods" included, inherent within the course activities, a variety of concomitant learning experiences not necessarily represented in the course outline. For example:

1. The students prepared a detailed map and household directory showing all the buildings in their respective communities and listing the residents by age and level of schooling. This brought them in contact with everyone in the community through a purposeful activity, and resulted in a document that was useful to many people in the school and community, not to mention the specific field method skills the students acquired in the process. This activity placed emphasis on the participant-observer's role, with the native and non-native students

sharing their observations from an "insider" and "outsider" perspective. Each activity was preceded by background reading and discussion, and followed by analysis and write-up.

2. The students prepared and conducted open-ended and structured interviews, focusing the questions on an education-related issue that was of immediate concern to themselves or to some element of the school or community. In this way they provided a useful service while gaining experience in interviewing techniques.
3. The students constructed and administered a questionnaire to a sampling of students, teachers, and parents, obtaining information regarding their attitudes on certain school-related issues. They compiled and analyzed the data, and made comparisons to determine the similarities and differences in the three sets of responses. In addition to learning about sampling, and the strengths and weaknesses of questionnaires as a data-gathering technique, they stimulated a lot of discussion in the community regarding the issues and were able to better understand some of the problems they would face as teachers.
4. Each student selected an informant from the community and prepared a "life history", focusing attention on the educational development of the individual. This activity stimulated dialogue between the students and other members of the community, and gave the students some perspective on the processes of cultural transmission, culture change, and acculturation, all of which are highly significant processes for teachers to understand in contemporary Alaska.
5. The students at each site were provided with film, cameras, and a complete set of darkroom equipment, and trained in the use of photography as a research technique. Each team prepared a photo essay of their community, including a photographic overview, incidents of social

interaction, a survey of the technology evident in the community, and a pictorial summary of their own activities as a team. These albums were then brought to the campus during the summer and shared with their fellow students from other teams. This enlarged their perspective on the diversity of cultures and environments existent within their own State.

6. Finally, all of the above information, along with a variety of additional data, were compiled and reported in the form of a community study. The information contained in these reports was of subsequent use to the students, and in several cases, accomplished useful purposes for others. For example, the household directory compiled by the students in one community was instrumental in convincing the U.S. Census Bureau that they had made a 40% error in the official 1970 census conducted the same year. In a community of 500 actual population, an error of this magnitude can result in drastic misappropriation of critical funds and services that are allocated on a per capita basis. Such results can stimulate a great deal of motivation and interest on the part of the community as well as the students.

I do not wish to imply that all courses were as able to capitalize on the resources of the field setting as the one I have described. Indeed, numerous courses were simply re-runs of the same courses as taught on campus. To the extent, however, that the instructors were familiar with the field setting and able to adapt their course to that setting, they usually did so. The most successful courses, from the students' point of view, were those that engaged them in meaningful thought and activities. But success was not necessarily dependent on the relevance of course content to the field setting. It was usually dependent on the sensitivity and creativity of the instructor.

If one reviewed the transcripts of the students who have participated in the ARTTC program he would find that the discipline most frequently represented (not including "education") would be that of anthropology. While this may be in part, a reflection of the educational background of those of us responsible for the academic component of the program, it did not occur without purpose of reasoning. If the students were to eventually overcome the ethnocentric confines of the existing educational system, and see beyond the usual narrow definition of concepts such as "schooling? and "teaching", they would have to develop a perspective that transcends cultural boundaries and provides a wholistic and adaptive framework for assessing needs and resolving problems. For that perspective we looked to the content and method of anthropology. We employed the concept of culture in its many and varied manifestations, as a means to help the students better assess and respond to the needs of the children they were preparing to teach. We used the methods of anthropology to guide us in the development and implementation of the program design. In a sense then, the program became an exercise in applied anthropology, not because it was involved in the training of "natives", but because anthropology provided the conceptual and methodological framework through which the program evolved.

During the summer of 1972, twenty-one students graduated from the ARTTC program. Ten of these were natives, who were now also teachers. These ten alone, nearly tripled the number of native teachers in rural Alaska at the time. One year after graduation, three of the ten native graduates and eight of the non-native graduates were still teaching in elementary school classrooms. Of the remaining seven native graduates, six were directing or working with non-school-related education programs, and one was resting.

By the end of summer, 1974, we will have graduated another twenty-four students, twenty-two of whom will be "native teachers". They will then join the ranks of the approximately 900 rural Teachers in the State and begin

making their contribution, along with their earlier teammates, to the improvement of education for the children of rural Alaska. The significance of that contribution will not be known for several generations.

What have we learned?

Since the program was intended to be experimental in nature, we have taken advantage of the rare opportunity to do a lot of experimenting. The whole program has, in effect, been an experiment in the techniques of survival in a bureaucratic society. We have experimented with alternative models in teacher education. We have experimented with different approaches to the delivery of academic coursework. We have experimented with a variety of conceptual frameworks for veiwing the process of education. And we have experimented with peoples lives, to the extent that we have ventured forth with them into the unknown.

So what have we learned from it all. In effect, we have learned most of what I have presented above. While we may have had vague notions about what we wanted to do in the beginning, we had no detailed, premeditated plan or preconceived model from which to work. Since we were unable to find a suitable training model elsewhere, and we did not want to force the students into a potentially inappropriate model of our own making, we decided to use a process approach and let the program evolve. What I have described above as the program then, is what we have learned, through a process of evolution.

We also have learned that the single most important characteristic that program personnel most possess, if such an approach is to succeed, is a high tolerance for ambiguity. Many persons find it difficult to cope with uncertainty and to proceed with little more than intuition and instinct as guides. They seek structure or closure on a matter before all the dimentions have adequately evolved. Under contemporary pressures for accountability and related demands for the delineation of specific objectives and the development of flow charts in pursuit

of explicit end products, it is indeed, difficult to survive on a creed that declares, "We will know where we are going when we get there." So far, we have learned enough about what we are doing and where we are going, in time to satisfy our own needs for direction and to meet the challenges of each step along the way. If we had tried to anticipate in the beginning all that we know now, we would have been overwhelmed and given up long ago. Our perspective has been bread in space, but narrow in time.

We have learned many other things since we started our journey that have implications for what we are trying to do. Since some of these are still vague and undocumented notions, and others are fundamental questions that may not be resolvable, I will present a few of them in brief, summary form here, as points of departure for future discussion.

We have learned that it is difficult to be a native and a teacher too. Many aspects of the two positions are incompatible and the demands of the role are enormous. On the one hand, as a native, he is expected to represent the communities interest in the school. On the other hand, as a teacher, he is expected to represent the school's interest in the community. Until the function and format of the school is compatible with the needs and cultural milieu of the community, compromise is inevitable for the native teacher. The adaptation is usually in the direction of the school, for it is difficult to significantly change the role of the teacher in the context of a conventional school environment. So the native teacher faces a Catch 22 - the more effective he is as a teacher, the less effective he may become as a native, and the more effective the school becomes in its overall influence on the children. Our concern then, is that placing native teachers in the schools may not significantly improve the education of native children, if the design of the institution itself does not change. But who is to change it, and in what direction?

We have also learned that our program may not really be training "teachers" after all. Six months into their first year of teaching, we brought the first group of graduates back together at a meeting to find out how they were doing in their hard-won profession. They related a variety of concerns, particularly in reference to the day-to-day routine of teaching. They did not feel adequately prepared to cope with such teaching responsibilities as lesson planning and classroom management. The consensus of the group was that they were frustrated as teachers in the schools, because they had been prepared as "educators". They felt more like general practitioners than specialists. Consequently, most of them left the schools and took up practice in other types of educational programs. Our tendency, at this point, is to view this outcome more as a success than as a failure.

Finally, we have learned that the literature in education, as well as anthropology, is often of limited use in our program. Almost all of the literature normally used to help prepare teachers for work with cultural minorities assumes that the teacher will be from outside the culture. From the native students point of view, the literature is "culturally deprived". While such issues as familiarity with the cultural background of the children, or ability to communicate effectively, are major issues in the one context, they become secondary in the other. In most of the literature, the natives usually find themselves as the objects of study. In an effort of break down some of the stereotypes embodied in the anthropological literature, we have focused our studies on groups and institutions in Western society. So now the native students are taking on the role of anthropologist and studying the primitive society of the school. We compensate for the lack of appropriate literature by generating our own.

These are only highlights of what we have done and have learned over the past few years. We intend to continue learning, from our successes as well as failures, because we have only scratched the surface in our efforts to release

the vast human potential embodied in the native people of Alaska. While mankind is taking giant leaps to the moon, man is still taking painfullly small steps toward improving his condition in this remote corner of the earth.

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